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Spanish Main, Modern Version

The modern pirates of the Spanish Main are again twisting the tail of the British Lion.

As those who fought against Drake of Devon discovered centuries ago, this can be a dangerous pastime. Britain today is not the sea power she was in the era of her maritime dominance. Nevertheless, the British Admiralty's tacit warning that Her Majesty's men-of-war would "safeguard the legitimate interests of all British ships on the high seas" may provoke some second thoughts among the leaders of the Cuban exile organization Alpha 66.

This secret group, apparently operating from some of the Caribbean islands as well as (possibly) from the Florida coast, has threatened to attack all merchant ships carrying goods of any kind to Cuba. Such a threat has no standing even in the somewhat loosely codified terms of international law. Alpha 66 does not represent a government in exile, or indeed, a government of any kind; it is not a recognized belligerent and it cannot maintain an effective blockade around Cuba. Unless the United States aids this or similar organizations surreptitiously—and there is no evidence it is doing so—Alpha 66 can be a dangerous nuisance but little else.

Its tactics will not overthrow Castro. They do violence to a principle for which both Britain and the United States have stood for decades—freedom of the seas. They could alienate the natural sympathy which most Americans feel for refugees from Castro Communism. They could further divide the NATO alliance at a time when a far more important crisis than Cuba—the settlement of the Berlin problem—is impending.